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Destabilizing Gender in The Rebellion of Miss Lucy Ann Lobdell

Abstract: The present paper focuses on the destabilization of gender through the analysis of William Klaber's *The Rebellion of Miss Lucy Ann Lobdell*, fictionalized version of Lucy/Joseph Lobdell's memoir through the lens of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. This memoir is specially chosen as the portrayal, in its own unique ways, reveals the nature of gender as explained by Butler. The memoir reveals how the closet character under pressure of the heterosexual society put up a performance of binary 'normality', which in itself destabilizes the ontology of gender.

Keywords: Binary, discourse, drag performance, gender, performativity.

1. Introduction

Differentiations of gender are becoming flexible or uncertain as it is; be it in terms of roles, preferences or beliefs. Where is the line to be drawn for a woman or man? Is there something, an origin or a starting point may be, that is especially manly or from which the woman deviates? This has been a matter of debate for long and still is. This paper attempts to illustrate the redefinition of gender in *The Rebellion of Miss Lucy Ann Lobdell* using the postmodern gender politics of Judith Butler.

2. Judith Butler: Gender Performativity

Performativity in postmodernism is a vogue concept which has expanded from performing arts and theatre contexts into heterogeneous matrixes. Performativity discovers itself in all expressive forms of behavior and gestures. The term 'performativity' is evolved from the verb 'to perform'.

The 1990s witnessed the emergence of a popular poststructuralist and feminist philosopher Judith Butler who has contributed to the fields of feminism, gender and queer theory. Butler coined the term "gender performativity" in her revolutionary work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Gender is performative, that it has no separate status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. By Austin's influence, Butler has used the concept of performativity in her analysis of gender development. Salih mentions about the difficulty 'to pin Butler down' into one specific field because of the importance of French thinkers Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida in her work, some will classify her as a poststructuralist, though she is also equally influenced by psychoanalytic theory, feminist theory, and Marxist theory (6). Butler's gender performativity has found its most sustained expression in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* and *Undoing Gender*.

In her influential works, Judith Butler attempts to deconstruct and investigate how social categories are constituted and practiced. She argues that the world in binaries; the distinction of male and female is not a natural, or essentially given. With her statement 'Gender is a fiction', she claims that there exists no gender previous to its creation. Throughout her works she poses questions that deconstruct the naturalization of gender. Butler's *Gender Trouble* is widely acclaimed as a ground-breaking book due to its revolutionary ideas concerning gender identity and the relations between gender and sex and the introduction of the notion of gender as performance or performativity. Butler considers

sex as a natural given category and gender as an acquired cultural-social category. She further develops this in her famous performative theory of gender which tries to account for the method in which a subject identity is formed, while establishing the claim that gender identity is not an exhibition of intrinsic core but rather the product of actions and behaviors, that is, performance. In other words, Butler argues that action, speech utterances, gestures and representations, dress codes and behaviors as well as certain prohibitions and taboos all work to produce what is supposed as essentially masculine or feminine identity.

Butler's theories on sex, race, and gender reject the previously assumed notion that they are biologically determined, as essentialists claim. Essentialists believe in the binary opposition of sex, gender and race, which for any specific entity there is a set of attributes and characteristics that are necessary to its identity and function. Instead she among many other theorists, argues that they are socially constructed and fluid in their interpretation and expression. She proposes in *Gender Trouble* as a set of "periodic practices based on performative theory of gender acts that disrupts the categories of the body, sex, gender, and sexuality and occasion their subversive resignification and proliferation beyond the binary frame" (xxxix).

Her works place gender and sex in the context of the discourses by which they are framed and formed. In this way the constructed character of both gender and sex will be disclosed. Butler uses the term 'discourse' in a Foucauldian way, where it is understood as 'large groups of statements' governing the way one speaks about and perceive a specific historical moment or moments (Butler, GT 47). She tries to give a concise definition to gender:

Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. A political genealogy of gender

ontology's, if it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender (Butler, GT 45).

Butler's notions that gender performativity do not support the argument that gender is a mere choosing a matter of choosing which gender an individual will be at any given moment (Critically Queer 17). Performativity can be a conscious, active choice, but it concerns the way in which individuals present their gender rather than which gender they are presenting. Butler found gender as always doing, she states the following:

. . . Gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results (Butler, GT 33).

In other sense, gender is not something one “is”, it is something one “does”, an act, or more precisely a sequence of acts, a verb rather than a noun, a “doing” rather than a “being” (Butler, GT 25). Also gender performativity theory opens a livable life to an extent. In *Undoing Gender* avers:

What moves me politically, and that for which I want to make room, is the moment in which a subject—a person, a collective—asserts a right or entitlement to a livable life when no such prior authorization exists, when no clearly enabling convention is in place (224).

Butler in *Gender Trouble* denies Simone de Beauvoir claim in *The Second Sex*, which accepts the sexing of the body as either male or female. She says that such a binary division

implies the necessary consequence for what it is culturally to be a woman. For her, sex does not cause gender. If sex is a fact, or destiny, then gender is open to alterations, or transformations.

Butler has used the term discourse in analyzing her views concerning gender and sex. In the simple sense, discourse is conversation or information. She uses discourse in Foucauldian way. Foucault in *History of Sexuality: An Introduction* defined the term 'discourse'. For him, discourse is a system of statements to understand the world. Discourses are modes of constituting knowledge together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations that inhere in such knowledge and the relations between them. In this sense, identity does not 'do' discourse or language, but language and discourse 'do' gender. There is no identity outside language and discourse. Culturally framed subjects are the effects rather than the causes of discourses that conceal their workings.

Butler in *Bodies That Matter* states that performative acts are forms of authoritative speech. Following Austin, Butler states that most performatives are statements. In the uttering, performative also performs a certain action and exercises a binding power. Performatives not only perform an action, but confer a binding power on the action performed. Most crucially, "If the power of discourse to produce that which it names is linked with the question of performativity, then the performative is one domain in which power acts as discourse" (225). In addition, there is no power, interpreted as a subject, but "a reiterated acting that is power in its persistence and instability" (225). She continues to describe power in Foucauldian terms as multiple and productive. Power is imbibed in all human relations and is exercised through the net like organization in our society. The networks through which power is exercised are not static but always in a continuous state of flux. It is productive in this sense that it produces discourse and forms of knowledge. In that case, it is possible to have a designated female body and not to display traits generally

considered to be feminine and to have a male body and not to display traits generally considered to be masculine. In essence, the cultural identity 'man' might therefore be applied to a female body and that of 'woman' to a male body. Moreover, there might be proliferation of genders rather than the two designated genders. She criticizes the regulatory work of gender performatives. Butler in *Undoing Gender* states:

Restrictive discourse on gender that insists on the binary of man and woman as the exclusive way to understand the gender field performs a regulatory operation of power that naturalizes the hegemonic instance and forecloses the think ability of its disruption (43).

Butler sees performativity as proposing one of the best chances for opposing regulatory frame work. So, there always remains a chance of multiple identities in the sphere of performativity. Performances that do not aid to strengthen law are suppressed and criticized. For example, small girls who don't like dolls will learn to play properly but they are suppressed as well as criticized. Explicitly, performativity is controlled by cultural factors, discourse and power structures. Butler accepts that such performances are like Austinian performatives because they create gender identity by being performed.

The socially constructed aspect of gender performativity is perhaps most evident in drag performance, which offers a necessary understanding of gender binaries in its emphasis on gender performance. Drag performances reveal that genders are simulacra (copies without originals). Drag is a term used to show men in women's clothes and drab is used for women in men's clothes. But, this makes a gulf between body and gender, which appears to be 'real' and questions the gender binary. Also, drag challenges compulsory heterosexuality. Butler states that "drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity" (174). In addition, Geoff Boucher in *The Politics of Performativity: A Critique of*

Judith Butler admires Butler's opinions that drag entirely changes the distinction between inner and outer psychic space. The construction of gender identities is produced through repetitive performance of behaviors, physical stylistic expressions, without which the binary distinction has no sense. Thus the drag exposes gender as a cultural code which relies on imitation and reappearance, lacking any initial, essential truth. The parody of the drag performance emphasizes to the point of radicalization the norms of gender performance. In this way drag enables the recognition of the mimicry at the base of any structure of identity, and the absence of any authentic source. Butler concedes that gender is the result of repeated acts. But they can repeat differently. Stress on repetition permits the suggestion that the norms thus repeated and recited themselves become weak in their repetition. In short, performativity works in both ways. It establishes the norms and also turn back to challenge them.

3. Analysis of the Text

The Rebellion of Miss Lucy Ann Lobdell by William Klaber is a fictionalized memoir in a historical novel pattern, organized in the nineteenth century context. Klaber tries to maintain the limited vocabulary of the nineteenth century to build Lobdell's distinct ways, even though the work is written on the twenty first century. The adventurous and confusing lifestyle of Lobdell fades the conventional gender binary of the century. Butler's deconstructing gender approach makes Lobdell to be a more 'natural' than 'unnatural' being.

The memoir about Lobdell is an account of exploration on untrodden paths of gender. S/he has altered the conventional boundaries set for wo/men. This saga has the potential to social transformation particularly focusing on the stereotypical role assigned to women. Lobdell's life not only questions patriarchal assumptions about gender but shows the urgent need for the redefinition of 'feminine' and 'masculine'. Butler calls gender a performative

gesture, and emphasize the social construction of gender. On standing on this turn, it is a “gender trouble” to address Lobdell with s/he as it is beyond this categorizations.

3.1 Historical Background and Discourse Analysis.

Judith Butler’s notion of gender performativity has the power to challenge the social and cultural taboos so as to move aside the borderlines of it. The power to construct as well as deconstruct the gender norms is embedded within the discourse. The performative notion of gender can only be proved by the exploration of the influence of discourse in Lobdell.

Lucy Ann Lobdell was born on 1829, Westerlo, Albemly county of New York into a working class family. Later, they moved on to Delaware County, when Lobdell was young. She fell in love with a man called George Washington Slater and married him. She left him because of the torture in family life. Lobdell’s pregnant and penniless state compelled her to move back to her parents. She was unable to look after her child Helen, because of the low wages as a woman. So, she cut her hair; dress up in brother’s clothing and she left the house at night in search of job and freedom. From this moment onwards, ‘she’ transformed into ‘he’ and ‘Lucy Ann Lobdell’ changed into ‘Joseph Isaiah Lobdell’. She travelled unescorted, carried her rifle, sits down in bars, had romantic relationships with other women and thus became a ‘man’.

The story of Lucy Ann Lobdell shows the consistently performative gender in America during the nineteenth century, which held a very conservative platform for women. Lucy Ann Lobdell’s narrative published in 1855, *Narrative of the Female Hunter of Delaware and Sullivan Counties N. Y. County* and other contemporary documents in which William Klaber inspect offer us the entry to the American outlook of gender, which constricts women by male hegemony. Klaber through language tries to outline the conventional and pre-existing discourse, by using language as an index of social settlement, thus letting for an exploration of individual from different perspectives. In much of the nineteenth century,

American civilized morality depended on the separation of male and female spheres and the distinctive character structures, which made this division sustained (Emilio 189). Also, women's existence was merely for looking after husband, household works and childbearing. Society was highly surrendered to gender roles and gender stereotypes of the Victorian notion that assure the binary gender construct, which considered women as emotional, caring and incompetent, and men as competent, rarely emotional and aggressive. The memoir unfolds in the past and present, as it discusses the issues of gender bias within the nineteenth century America which upholds men's superiority. Women had low wages than men and it was difficult for women to live single. American civil war (1861-1865), which coincides with Lobdell's lifetime, shows women using cross-dressing as a method of joining men's society. Around 240 women have participated in the civil war by cross-dressing as men. Most of them continued there cross-dressing till the death, in spite of opposition from society. In short, Victorian America is an echo of Simon de Beauvoir's claim that in the patriarchal society the male is the "One" and the female is the "Other" or the second sex (Beauvoir 129). Hence the patriarchal society of nineteenth century America has hierarchized gender with the male over the female.

The story of Lobdell links between the past and present, which shows the distinction between gender performance and gender performativity; subtly problematizes the social boundaries of men and women. Lucy Ann/Joseph Lobdell tries to stand against the existed gender norms and liberates herself from the constrictive system although she had received punishment for that.

3.2 Lobdell is Destabilizing Gender

Lucy/Joseph Lobdell attempts to destabilize and to transcend the binary frame which prevents the fluidity of gender and sex. The Memoir about her dissolves the conventional understanding of gender and the perception of the conflicting binaries 'male or female', man

or woman' and 'masculinity or femininity'. According to Butler's conception, "performativity" denotes the culturally-scripted character of identity, which is created by power through repeated citations of norms and their transgression (Boucher). Also, Lobdell's life is about sacrifices, struggles, compromises, internal conflicts and how she copes up with life. Lobdell shows the repeating stylistics within herself from the early childhood, the manifestation of masculinity is portrayed at the early part of life itself. "... Father had taught me to shoot and ride play the violin, things that the other girls were not by their fathers" (Klaber 97).

Lobdell refers to the compulsory performance of femininity which is manifested at first part of her lifetime, it is described as "those years held my girlhood" (Klaber 36). On those years, she is being constantly compelled to be a 'woman' by her mother and brother. For the first twenty years of her life, Lobdell tries to behave as a 'normal woman' does, when being with them. As a part of this, she suppresses her desire and internalizes what society wants to do with her and what she can do, if she is a man. Lobdell's quest for freedom finds expression through performing of her 'self', which destabilizes the binary gender concept.

'Lucy's change into 'Joseph' is a part of improving her conditions in the society. She is "... not angry that this world was generally denied to women but excited that it was open to me" (Klaber 34). This is the politics of Butler's performativity, which allows alterations of existing constrictive gender. According to Butler, what is taken as the naturalized knowledge of gender is, in fact a "changeable and revisable reality" (Butler, GT xxiii). The overlapping of gender binary is an indicator of performativity, which is depicted in the memoir as "a man's nerve and woman's keen eye" (Klaber107). This overlapping can be seen throughout Lobdell, Drag performativity, Transgender and Lesbian identities found mix up in Lobdell's performance, which all destabilizes existing gender notions.

3.2.1 Drag Performativity and Destabilizing Heterosexuality

The Rebellion of Miss Lucy Ann Lobdell questions the desperately strict obedience to gendered behavior in a conventional social framework which gives birth to identity; in turn, she parodies gender and subverts subjectivity. Her gender identity becomes a parody of gender, which is already parodied and has no truth value. Butler avers:

If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the true effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity (Butler, GT136).

The imitation of parodic masculinity or drab performativity shows the disjunction between the body of the performer and the gender that is being performed. The act of social parodying of gender begins with the change of external appearance. “Three days later I while it was still dark and put on a shirt and breeches, clothes my brother had outgrown. I cut my hair by candlelight and wrote a note saying I’d gone hunting” (Klaber 7). Lucy Ann Lobdell’s masculinity is created through, or brought into existence, through the performance of wearing clothes as a man and acting like a man. By this external change of appearance of Lucy Ann Lobdell changed to Joseph Lobdell. And she gets the sanction of the society until the secret is concealed. For Lobdell dress mostly creates her identity, gender identity is formed from the clothes that a person wears, through the cultural inference. (Butler, GT xxii)

From this very moment, Lobdell performs well in the roles of masculinity and femininity. And so she becomes a model of Butler’s idea of drab, Butler argued that drag and drab “subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity” (Butler, GT 174). Drab is usually seen as ‘unsuccessful’ representation of gender identity. The comments, “you have the touch of a woman” (Klaber 63) and “you handle an axe like a girl” (Klaber 208) shows the unsuccessful manifestation of masculinity.

When she dresses up like a man she is trying to ridicule what is considered to be masculine and what is considered to be feminine. But this ridiculing has expanded the possibilities of a woman, even though she is doing under the tagline of a man. 'Lucy Ann's life as 'Joseph Isaiah' is an imitation of prominent construction of 'masculinity', this act destabilizes the ontological claim of what is 'masculine' and what is 'feminine' with Butler's conception of drag performativity. Even though, drag only stick on to the binary concept, it destabilizes and overthrows the root of gender construction.

There can be a question regarding Lobdell's choosing strict masculine behavior. For Butler, "gendered bodies are, so many 'styles of the flesh'," but styles that are "never fully self-styled, or styles have a history, and those histories condition and limit possibilities" (Butler, *Bodies*139). The heterosexual norm and hegemony conditioned society about the superiority of men over women. In turn, the female becomes the passive role and internalized themselves inferior. When Lobdell's identity is switched on to Drag performativity, she in effect shows heterosexual relationships with women illustrates an attempt to bullying gender construct. This stands as a part of her internalization of masculinity, which goes to an extent of making love affairs with women. She fell in love with her student Lydia and she has married Mary. Drag performativity with heterosexuality establishes the "experience of the body in question" and call attention to the "social basis of gender and sexuality" (Gamson 51). In this way, Lobdell "denaturalizes" heterosexual norm and hegemony that existed in the society. These all break the claim of authenticity in gender and heterosexuality; thus creates gender trouble. When her secret is discovered in Honesdale, Judge asks her whether she will be father or mother to her daughter. Later, the judge "Charged against for wearing men's clothes and pretending to be a man" (Klaber237) Thus, she undergoes rejection with persecution from society, for gender-bending and creating gender trouble.

3.2.2 Transgender or Lesbian identity

Lucy/Joseph Lobdell life is transgressive representation in which she behaves in a pattern that can drag into categories of “transgender” or “lesbian”. Both these are undoing traditional genders and thus, provide an ultimate ontological challenge to the gender binary system. She shows a ‘different’ gender identities by loving both ‘men’ and ‘women’. To use the terms “transgender” and “lesbian” in Lobdell is anachronistic since it is coined in the twentieth century. Transgender possess both masculinity and femininity as much as any individual. They only annihilate the divisions of the binaries but not the binaries themselves. “This is not the figure of the androgyne nor some hypothetical “third gender,” nor is it a transcendence of the binary. Instead, it is an internal subversion in which the binary is both presupposed and proliferated to the point where it no longer makes sense” (Butler, GT 162).

Bambi Lobdell, portrayed her unique ancestor as “transgendered”, by transgender she means “a female-born body that crosses traditional gender and sexual boundaries to claim a male identity and life, a movement that transgresses binary boundaries and positions the subject in the third space of as-yet-unnamed potential subjectivities and lifestyles” (Lobdell). Transgender and lesbian categories are already out of the binary frame. Butler says that bisexuality and homosexuality emerge as a construction of an outside but she considers identity categories are “normative signifying practices, performatively produced within discourses” (Angelides 192). They are cultural possibilities that are rejected and accepted as impossible, unthinkable and unsayable within the existing cultural framework but at the same time, they serve as the locus of subversion (Butler GT 98).

Lobdell’s life shows an overturn of subjectivity in gender, which has to be categorized more than ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’. The gender non- conformity can be seen throughout the memoir. Lobdell herself disclose the confusion that whether she had loved Lydia as a man loves a woman or if it was just an oddity of nature- none of it mattered. She was not looking

for a husband, nor was she looking for a wife. She could not imagine loving anyone other than Lydia.

Klaber presents Lobdell's life as having the innermost recesses of the human psyche which compels an individual to struggle against the forces that make the oddities of life difficult to bear. Lobdell's life finds scope for a realization of life beyond the hold of social rituals, even if she was punished for it. Lesbian or transgender existence is a mode of exploring life in this way. Also, Anderson classifies Lucy Ann/Joseph Lobdell as the first lesbian subjected to institutionalization on the basis of sexual object choice or as a woman who chose to pass as a man to enjoy both greater economic opportunity and the freedom to marry a woman (171-172).

Through *The Rebellion of Miss Lucy Ann Lobdell*, shows the gender performativity which allows a whole lot of freedom to gender, even though she lived prior to the formation of theories. Even though, Lobdell does not take up a non-existential gender or a space, to see her as subversion. And yet, are very much part of the mold that the society has created.

4. Conclusion

The analysis of the memoir, *The Rebellion of Miss Lucy Ann Lobdell* through the lens of Butler's gender performativity theory confirms the performative gender of Lobdell. The character of Lobdell in the memoir exposes that subversion within the discourse of gender destabilizes the ontology of gender. Without destroying the binary frame, Lobdell questioned the ontological claim on gender as two solid and separate entities through mere drag performance. Bodies are only found to be a mere stage to enact gender, which may or, may not go hand in hand with 'written' on the body. Thus, the memoir presents gender on a slippery ground and confirms that gender as something that is earned or learned rather than fixed borderlines.

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